RESEARCH PLAN PROPOSAL

Reclaiming Land and Nation: The Writings of Alexis Wright

For Registration to the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

THE IIS UNIVERSITY, JAIPUR

Submitted by

Ruchi Sharma

ICG/ 2013/ 16424

Under the Supervision of

Prof. Sudha Rai

Department of English

July 2013

I. Tentative Title

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II. Research Problem

Many Australian writers are recognized in the international market specifically for their "Australianness". This trend has been particularly evident in recent writings produced by award-winning Aboriginal authors. The connection between the writing and the national adherence is celebrated in the themes and settings of the enormously popular aboriginal writings. Benedict Anderson states in *Imagined Communities* that nations 'always looms out of an immemorial past, and… glide into a limitless future' (11-12). Fictional social worlds of these writings, therefore, investigate power politics in elaborate metaphors of the land and nation. Penny Van Toorn explains in her work "Indigenous texts and narratives" how Kevin Gilbert one of the founders of contemporary Aboriginal literature 'called for justice and land rights, challenged racist stereotypes, dismantled exclusionary models of national identity, and corrected biased historical narratives of progress and peaceful settlement' (29) in his political writings -- *Because a White Man'll Never Do It* (1973) and *Aboriginal Sovereignty: Justice, The Law and the Land* (1993). Another prominent author and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) prolifically voices out Aboriginal issues that had long been unheard by the white population in her first collection of poetry *We Are Going* (1964).

Being a settler/invader society, people of multicultural land Australia have witnessed the problem wherein not many scholars have been able to mark a clear distinction between the end of the colonial period and the birth of the Australian nation. The national constructions in Indigenous writings have tried to re-evaluate the notion of belongingness by reclaiming their land rights. These authors redefine the static notion of a nation's being and becoming by constructing a nation as a homeland in their writings. Despite other important fictional and critical works spawning out of historical perspectives the very fabric of aboriginal writing was represented with the tension advocated through Aboriginal land rights and political self-determination. Indigenous affairs or the Native Problems pertaining native title had come to an end, superficially with *Mabo* judgment in 1992.

Gradual realization about existing forms of exploitation of people and resources lead to rise of new writers who investigated different forms of culture appropriation of indigenous people. Alexis Wright, an activist and award-winning writer is one such author who sensitively sensitizes rape, dispossession, land rights, substance abuse by bringing together myth, history, memory and imagination. She merges humour and seriousness, Dreamtime and Christianity, ambivalence and certainty, and politics and art in her fictional and non-fictional works to imagine and create a free utopian world. She is a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Her father was a white cattleman who died when she was five. She grew up with her aboriginal mother and grandmother in Cloncurry, Queensland.

Though, she had received a rudimentary education while at school, she has completed degrees in social studies, media and creative writing at universities in Adelaide and Melbourne, and is presently a Distinguished Research Fellow at The Writing & Society Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, undertaking studies in Aboriginal Storytelling for a Doctorate of Philosophy. She has worked widely in government departments and Aboriginal agencies across Australian states and territories as a professional manager, educator, researcher and writer.

Wright develops a number of themes around land and nation in her works. Nicholas Jose after reading her novel *Plains of Promise* declares —'This graphic novel encapsulates the horror of a sad chapter of Australian history. But, at the same time, it demonstrates the complexity of providing redress and justice to the indigenous people of this country.' Diane Molly, a scholar from Monash University states in her article entitled " Finding Hope in the Stories: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and the Carnivalesque Search for a New Order" – '*Carpentaria* calls for a re-birth of Aboriginal culture and provides a new perspective on literary representations of Aboriginal people while recognising the limits of literature to bring about social change' (7). In addition, George Williamson has discovered that Wright's works are 'seamless shifting from allegory to politics, surrealism to naturalism…in an imaginative leap across time, place and cultures.'

Wright continues the legacy of a history of 'past violations' by producing literature against the new wrongs that have been perpetrated against Aboriginal Australians. Her works have helped the indigenous population in restoring their faith in their own people as she voices out repression and rejection faced by various indigenous communities with their enduring struggle of reestablishing and restoring their faith in their rich heritage. The unconnected or distracting subplots presented in a non-linear sequence put across uncontested domination of narrative techniques like magic realism further create a new version of history. Consequently, these writings reflect upon the proximity of cultural politics to national politics that hover around the dynamics of defining Australia in literary writings.

Critical reception of Alexis Wright necessitates a full length research investigation into the range of her imagination and narrative expression as she stands at the forefront of Aboriginal writing. This thesis will, therefore, analyze selected fictional and non-fictional writings of the author.

Australian nation claims Australia as its own while Aboriginal people contest the land, the place and the sovereignty as rightfully their own. The chief questions will, consequently, investigate: what kinds of gaps in the history are being filled by Aboriginal writers? What kinds of indigenous cultural myths and values are rebuilt in these narratives? Can a nation be contested and claimed? How are these realities portrayed in the writings with very strong experimentation that also rely on Aboriginal Dreamtime?

While narratives of the nation are marked by aboriginal representations, the hypothesis of this thesis would essentially focus on the narratives which act as mediator between the men and land. This is evidenced by the appropriation of the failure of Europeans to understand or come to terms with the land and by the emergence of some common themes like—the trauma of the stolen generations, the preservation of aboriginal culture and anxieties about miscegenation, interracial sexual relations, reconciliation and assimilation. These themes are woven together with the threads of Aboriginal spiritual values that primarily include the nature of their relationship with the land. As such, land emerges as an agent of revelation or vengeance demonstrating the complexity of contemporary Australian writings that have appropriation of land and identity of the aboriginal people at the core.

In testing the hypothesis the writings of Alexis Wright will be analyzed for socio-political and psychological implications of the history wars in the context of literature produced by aboriginal writers. The study will include primary works of the author that directly contribute to her views on land and nation, and secondary sources incorporating critical studies. The anticipated conclusion is that Wright establishes a new order in her writing by providing a new vision of the future that breaks the colonial shackles in her attempt to reclaim aboriginal land and nation as rightfully their own. She uses the history of her nation to examine the nature of land that provides readers a gaze into the political basis of the symbolic realm of space in the narratives.

III. Definition of Terms

"**Aboriginality**": Aboriginality includes a combination of cultural heritage, spirituality and an intrinsic link with the land (Board of Studies NSW, 2010).

"**Agency**": The power by which a particular individual, group, or text could act, or the mode or means of action. (List of Critical Terms and Definitions by Malcolm Hayward, 1995.

"**Assimilation**": It is an umbrella term that can mean different things in different times and places. Primarily, it is a 19th century idea that Aboriginal people should be 'improved' by being 'civilised' and Christianised. From the 1930s assimilation was government policy (Board of Studies NSW, 2010). In Australia of late 19th and early 20th centuries, whites had foreseen the 'assimilation' of Indigenous people through their 'cultural assimilation' and 'biological absorption'.

"**Citizenship**": Citizenship is membership of a nation/state- a relationship between the individual and the state in which the two are bound together by a reciprocal rights and responsibilities. T.H. Marshall defines citizenship as 'full and equal membership in a political community.'

"**Land**": The term *Land*, like *Country*, is used by Aboriginal people to describe their ecosystems – a sum total of spiritual beliefs, including Dreaming, all living things including totems and all

physical factors such as sacred sites, water, air and geographical features (Board of Studies NSW, 2010).

"**Nation**": Nation (from the Latin word *nasci* meaning to be free) is defined by a combination of cultural and political factors. Culturally a nation comprises of a group of people who are bound together by a common language, religion, history and traditions. It also draws its definition through the existence of a shared civic consciousness, classically expressed as the desire to achieve or maintain statehood. It also refers to the specific aboriginal identity as a collective entity of tribes in Australian writings.

"**Nationalism**": Generally understood, nationalism refers to the self-definition and self-consciousness of the 'nation' or people as a unified entity.

"**Terra-nullius**": British colonisation policies and subsequent land laws were framed in the belief that the colony was being acquired by occupation (or settlement) of a terra nullius (land without owners). The colonizers acknowledged the presence of Indigenous people, but justified their land acquisition policies by saying the Aborigines were too primitive to be actual owners and sovereigns and that they had no readily identifiable hierarchy or political order which the British Government could recognise or negotiate with. The concept has been used to justify the invasion and colonisation of Australia. However, the High Court's Mabo judgment in 1992 overturned the terra nullius fiction.

"**Reconciliation**": In Australia 'reconciliation' is the term used to refer to the bringing together of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or Indigenous, and non-Indigenous Australians. The word 'reconciliation' was introduced in 1988 when 14 heads of Australian Christian Churches issued a statement entitled 'Towards Reconciliation in Australian Society'. The Draft Document for Aboriginal Reconciliation was published in June 1999 by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and consists of a Declaration for Reconciliation and National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation. The strategies were designed to achieve economic independence, to address disadvantage, to promote recognition of rights, and to sustain the reconciliation process.

"**Dreamtime**": In the animist framework of Australian Aboriginal mythology, Dreamtime is a sacred era in which ancestral totemic spirit beings created the world. The Dreaming establishes the structures of society, rules of social behavior, and the ceremonies performed to ensure continuity of life and land. It governs the laws of community, cultural lore and how people are required to behave in their communities. The condition that is The Dreaming is met when people live according to law, and live the lore: perpetuating initiations and Dreaming transmissions or lineages, singing the songs, dancing the dances, telling the stories, painting the Songlines and Dreamings.

IV. Background

Australian literary canon has been majorly engaged with pre-invasion and post-invasion period of the Australian nation. The protocols of writing historical narratives and life-writings have considered indigenous traditions as an important subject. The attempts to represent and reflect 'Native Problems' in literary writings have helped scholars to assess the significance of themes like alcohol abuse, domestic violence, youth suicide, indifference to educational attainment, dispossession of ancient aboriginal lands, displacement and their struggle for the land rights in indigenous writings. Bruce Sutherland in his work "The Aborigine in Australian Fiction" quotes Mark Twain's remarks- 'Australia is fertile in writers whose books are faithful mirrors of the life of the country and of its history' (17). However, his concern with the representation of the aborigine as a savage in the environment of his customs and ceremonies had left him with the hope for a truly great work that was yet to appear, some great work or collection of works that 'will make the aborigine live forever in the literature of Australia' (19).

The old master narratives constituted heroic white explorers and settlers, but did not include Aborigines. White-authored historical texts either dismissed or distorted the aboriginal role in the story of Australia. Keith Windschuttle had contributed to the recorded history by writing *The Killing of History* (1994) and *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002). He was, however, charged for misrepresenting historical facts of frontier violence in Tasmania and for his naïve overreliance on official sources that could not be expected to report fully the reality of the frontier. This had lead to few footnote errors (Bonnell and Crotty, 159). Jack Davis, an aboriginal playwright of international stature, disappointingly states that 'history is more important, more inseparable [for Aborigines] than in case for white writers….[For whites] history is in safe hands, white hands….Aboriginal people have been excluded from the pages of white history'(5).

Indigenous writers eventually produced works that broke the hegemony of the power structure by reinventing and reimagining narratives which helped them recover from the period of European settlement that brought suffering. The freedom to depoliticize the postcolonial trauma helped them create a version of history in their narratives. These writers use imperial language as an effective means to achieve their objective to deconstruct and reconstruct nation's history. P.R. Stephensen in 1935 sated—'we are on the threshold of Australian self-consciousness, at the point of developing Australian nationality, and with it Australian culture'. Critics like Brian Kiernan in his book *Criticism* had eventually argued of the emergence of the concept of national literature before the political nationalism of the nineteenth century (11-12). National consciousness was, however, embarked in the history, myths, literature, folklore, mass media and official ceremonies that created a linear narrative through history. Soon it was realized that the narratives came from diverse communities that had succeeded in spreading nationalism through print capitalism in 1890's. Nathanael O'Reilly in his research paper marks importance of

the *Bulletin*, a publication that helped "The Australian Nationalists" like Henry Lawson and A.B. Banjo emerges with 'something like the beginning of a national school of literature' (118).

Anderson's idea of 'historical time' was utilized by indigenous authors who presented nation in these narratives as a concept that was expressed with multiple images of the experiences of natives in the homeland. These narratives provided scope to the writers to include, exclude, reject and present their stories in their version of history. The politicization of Australian history through the process of 'reconciliation' and 'assimilation' has been detrimental to academic debate towards a 'black armband' view that often lead to 'culture wars.' In 1999 the 'first peoples' politics had further been mentioned by Gary Johns and Ron Brunton in their work entitled "Reconciliation: What Does It Mean?". The paper explains how 'majority of Aborigines have little interest in asserting their political distinctiveness, let alone their autonomy, from the rest of Australia…. Clearly, a group of Aboriginal activists believes that 'reconciliation' must include a fundamental reassessment of the legal basis of Australian nationhood.(4,6)' Lately, in 2014 Anita Heiss, aboriginal writer and an activist in her essay "On Being Invisible" was noted struggling to deal with the injustice done to her community and her people. She marks -- 'what is missing from the Australian story is the first Australians'.

Contemporary aboriginal writings vibrantly suggest how streaks of racial politics are being redrawn to take their struggle to a new level. The orient's representation of the culture celebrates Aboriginal survival with an unyielding resistance in the narratives, particularly written by Aboriginal women writers. Alexis Wright questions in 2007 in her work "On Writing Carpentaria" – 'What songs should be sung in recognition of our national collectivity? (92)'. A related question was asked by Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak in their book that was published in the same year *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*. Diana Brydon in 2012 in her keynote address of a conference on "Reading Across the Pacific" has further pondered over these questions as she emphasizes on the responsibility of the scholar in today's world to closely look at these 'series of questions about national and global imaginaries, human rights, democratic governance'. These texts help us look at the possibility of depoliticizing the postcolonial trauma through the framework of counter narratives.

The colonial culture and its ideologies underpin the writings produced by the aboriginal writers. This thesis is an attempt to recognize and demonstrate the significance of traditional Indigenous knowledge in resistance narratives produced by Alexis Wright who makes an attempt to restore faith in the Australian nation by reclaiming aboriginal land. The writings undertaken for the study dismantle the colonial machinery by utilizing the art of aboriginal storytelling as a form.

In other words, these narratives reinscribe traditional liberal values as they seek new ways of thinking about the nation that could help indigenous writer reimagine about land and nation by rewriting the history. The counter narratives thus produced provide a voice in the

cultural space to protest for literary and social recognition. David Carter in his chapter "Critics, writers, intellectuals: Australian literature and its criticism" quotes Nettie Palmer, who sets the model for Australian literature in 1929—'it is Shakespeare that proves England a nation' (Webby, 2000). The idea that Australia be presented in the narratives has influenced others to generate an optimistic view of the national character which fundamentally expresses the whole national life of the nation. The present study is interested in the writings of Alexis Wright that bridge the gap between the colonial past and the emerging present of the nation. This thesis examines and traces the significance of the notion of nation and significance of land in local and universal territories that call for the national movement.

The environmental practices of Aboriginal people towards an ecological sustainability set the background of these writings while the colonial project of exploiting resources had been disclosed in the conflict caused by misuse and disrespect of the land. The writings explore the different ways in which people of the land conceptualize their relation with it. The present study, therefore, will explore different ways in which Wright portrays the people of the land and conceptualizes their relation with it only to reclaim aboriginal rights and dignity.

With the publication of many new works on aboriginal writings, nation and nationalisms this research will add to the existing scholarship by tracing the problems of the multicultural nation by defining how Wright's writings are nationalist revisions of Australian history as they create a new version of 'Australia'. By identifying socio-political issues in her selected fictional and non-fictional works, this study hopes to illuminate an understanding of indigenous culture. The history of the nation and spiritual significance of the land has not only provided writer scope to give way to a nation as an imagined community but has also incorporated in her narrative metaphors of land and nation. Ultimately, this thesis would prove that Wright has encompassed a broader notion of land and nation that challenges power relations and infuses self-determination in indigenous people.

V. Research Methodology

The research methods will consist of interpreting and comparing/contrasting the primary sources. Biographical and historical material will be used in order to establish the social and political climate which influenced the writings. Findings would be supported with a significant number of critical writings such as treaties, agreements, co-judgments and reports. Oral narratives, self-narratives, life, writings which deal with the subject of aboriginal storytelling will also be studied. Audio and audio-visual recordings of oral history of aboriginal culture will also form a valuable part of the research methodology. The approach will be interdisciplinary and will specifically deal with socio-political and historical subjects.

VI. Chapter Plan

1. Introduction (Socio-political and Cultural Contexts of the Australian Nation)
2. *Plains of Promise*: Recovering Family and Community Histories
3. *Carpentaria*: Negotiating Colonization
4. *The Swan Book*: Environment Dystopia of the Future
5. Narrative Experimentation
6. Conclusion

VII. Chapter Content

The first chapter will focus on the indigenous view of the nation. The strained relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people will make the thrust to understand the grief, loss, and hurt of the indigenous community. It will analyze the significance of the traditional country, language and culture in the making of the Australian nation. The socio-political and cultural dimensions will further be decoded to illuminate about the philosophy of indigenous people within the historical framework of the literary writings.

The second chapter will focus on Wright's novel *Plains of Promise*. It will attempt to study various issues and mistreatment of the indigenous community in the past. In the context of indigenous community it will emphasize on aspects of healing the self and family through writing. The isolated and marginalized communities suffering the consequences of deliberate and calculated policies will explicitly reveal the colonial project of establishing political control over their land and nation.

The next chapter will study *Carpentaria* for the dispersing and domination practices of colonization as presented in the novel. It will focus not only on the colonial past, but will also study the novel presenting ways of negotiation made by aboriginal communities in a settler colonial nation. The political discourse will unfold aboriginal affairs that have been presented in writings with bipolar of government authorities and people of the nation.

The fourth chapter will analyze *The Swan Book* that provides a utopian idea of a nation ruled by an aboriginal Prime Minister. The conception of the novelist will be studied for the amalgamation of a spiritual world of aboriginal community with the urbanized postcolonial world. This chapter would undertake a study of fractured identities of indigenous population that are set right by establishing harmony between nature and man.

The interpretation and analyses of these novels will be done by undertaking study of non-fictional writings like *Tolerance, Fear and Prejudice*, *Grog War* and *Take Power*. These writings will also be discussed to support the analyses. The chapters will focus on how narrators are often witnessed contesting for rediscovering and reinterpreting identity by deconstructing the place and by revealing politicization of culture that provides meaning to time and space of these novels.

The fifth chapter will emphasize on the narrative experimentation in the writings of Alexis Wright. It will significantly help in understanding the significance of land in national narratives. It will focus on narrative experimentation where the author combines realism with fantasy in magic realism as a literary genre. The chapter will explore the novels for postmodern, postcolonial and historical reading. The narrative features of aboriginal writings with an authoritative voice will be studied to understand various strands of ethnic symphony of Australian society. It will attempt to find how the writings on nation have enhanced our understanding in providing us a periphery along which one can work to extend and develop decidedly stronger meaning of narratives produced in the nation at a point in time and space.

The last chapter will focus upon the spiritual connection and healing affirmations to which aboriginal writers can succeed in decentering white historical fictions contesting for a nation as theirs. It will explore how land and nation encapsulate the healing process through which writer creates and recreates, defines and redefines the complex context of her novels. Wright's fictional and non-fictional works will provide oppositional historical perspectives to be studied to understand the existing trauma faced within the aboriginal culture.

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